

The Nature of Tasmanian Tigers

Parts of the Thylacine: a pouch, thin dark lashes along its back, a too-long tail, an obnoxious one, a tail that could swoop, could trip and slap, a snout. The thylacine's name means "dog-faced," but is more commonly known as the Tasmanian Tiger. Despite these names, it's classified as a marsupial. The thylacine is many things: dog, cat, marsupial. Unlike other marsupials, male thylacines also have a pouch. A scrotal one to hide their sac when threatened. Women use the pouch to protect their young, the men use it to protect themselves.

My granddaughter and I learn all this from a copper plaque at the museum. Two stuffed thylacines accompany it. One bares teeth. The other seems to frown. Their stuck bodies are circled in tall plastic grass, most of the fur is dirt-colored, and the museum's ambient jungle noise soundtrack coats them babyish somehow. It's the day after my son's funeral.

Madison giggles and gets so close the guard rope has to hold her back. She can nearly touch their dry noses, their sightless glass eyes.

"Nana, look at me," she says, in that garbled toddler voice. High-pitched and nonsensical with glee. She turns and flashes her teeth. Crooked, baby ones. Her eyes are wide, wild, and green like grasshoppers. She growls. I can only see my son in her when she's being funny like this. Madison inherited that quality from Mason. She always wanted to be laughing.

I do my part and gasp dramatically, placing a hand on my heart.

"Maddy! You scared Nana," I say, and she giggles more in return, runs back to me, and flings herself at my legs. With her face pressed into my thigh, I imagine, just for a moment, that she doesn't exist. She is Mason. We are on his preschool field trip, and he's about to reach up with both hands. Ask if I can hold him. We are in a time before he started with the drugs and the

alcohol. We are in a time when there was still a warm, earthy tone in his face, when he didn't punch holes in walls, and when he still called me "Mom."

Madison is three. She doesn't know what dead means. She doesn't know what funeral or overdose or passed away means. I don't know how to help other than show her other things that are also gone forever, so I bring her here. When she moves her face from my leg and looks up at me, her eyebrows are furrowed. She hasn't mentioned her dad since he was found five days ago. Curled on the kitchen tile of an Airbnb, nesting beer bottles and a baggie of coke with his cold body. I'm afraid Madison will cry, and then I'll cry. But, she doesn't.

"I want ice cream, Nana," she says with a whine. I look at the thylacine once more, the sad one and the angry one, and take her hand—her small, soft, uncalloused hand—before roaming to the museum restaurant.

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I often think about how Madison will only have photographs of her father from when he was born to age twenty-two. His timeline ends there. She will one day grow older than he ever was, and he will always be young to her. Still a pale, spindly teenager. We have black and white photos of the last thylacine—it died in 1936 at a zoo in Australia, and they called her Benjamin even though she was once a mother and had no scrotal pouch—but most articles and books on the species use illustrations. They look nicer this way. Less feeble. Less defeated.

For the funeral service, I frame a selfie of Mason taken a week before his death. That day, he'd taken Madison on a hike. We're going to spot coyotes and play in the lake, he told her, lips busted, but grinning. He'd dropped Madison off the night before, drunk, stumbling, iris-less. Told me he was done with her. Told me he hoped Madison's mother died for leaving him with her. In the photo, Madison is on his shoulders. They're both open-mouthed, laughing. Their skin

is hazy orange like the sun is setting in front of them. This is the image I want her and everyone to have of Mason: loving, young, fatherly. I want it to maul what everyone knew he was.

Madison has a spot of chocolate on the tip of her nose. Eyes crossed, she tries to reach it with her tongue, and the bluish underside of it is shiny wet. I don't make Madison eat lunch. She only wants sugary things. Indulgence, apparently, is another quality she and Mason shared.

“You're a silly girl,” I say, and she smiles. All teeth. “Silly like your Daddy.”

Madison doesn't become sad like I do when I say this. She doesn't try to claw through memories of who and what changed him, and when. She just bunches up her face and repeats “Silly like Daddy, Silly like Daddy,” until she's singing it. Until she's chanting like it's something to be proud of.

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When they lift his body off the floor, seal it in opaque plastic, and carry it away to be preserved until the funeral, I am calm. The other people in the Airbnb—of his species, partygoers, addicts, racooned eyes and pallid—cower. They warm each other's bodies on couches, in corners, and cry. Turn away from Mason. Hide their eyes behind fingers. One of them vomits. I stand at the kitchen entryway with my jaw clenched and arms crossed. Someone tells me they are sorry. I nod.

At home, I need to mother him again. It's a feeling that won't leave. Muscle memory. I turn the television on for Madison and dart to his old room: a twin bed, an anthill of mismatched clothing he left, a tub of dust-ridden G.I Joes, tiny cars, and Lincoln Logs. The walls are light green. I'm frantic: I make the bed, fold his abandoned t-shirts and smell each one, I construct tiny log cabins all across the floor, I lay sprawled on the carpet, surrounded by them.

Afterwards, I'm still not satisfied. I scavenge my kitchen. Devour all the foods he hated, so he could have the good things. I swallow spooned kalamata olives whole, brine dripping down my neck. Tear at mandarin oranges with the peel still there. Smack my lips and feel Cheetos cake my molars. Furred in crumbs and juice, I go to my room. Find the box of his birth certificate, his first-day-of-school photo, his high school graduation cords. Empty all the contents onto my bed. Sit on my knees and gather everything together in a pile with arms. Embrace the pile. Rest the side of my face on it.

I inhale the smell of old paper and exhale. Then, I spot a speeding ticket and back away. I stand up again. A speeding ticket shouldn't be important, but it is. Bright orange. Torn slightly. Looking at it, I can see the version of himself he evolved into. I need to vomit. I need to cry.

Madison speaks from my bedroom door.

"Nana," she says. "I want to go to sleep now."

I turn to her. She's slouched, messy-haired, and her toy doll dangles from her fingertips. It is two in the morning. I hadn't made her dinner. I hadn't tucked her in.

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The thylacine goes extinct because it pretends to be something it isn't. It runs with wolves and raids chicken coops, picks fights with farmer's dogs and wild dingoes, even though its bite was weak. Even though it only ever ate small rodents. Humans hunted them. Plucked them off as they did the other beasts. By looking, they'd never guess the thylacine was nearly a kangaroo.

Madison and I return to the historic mammal's exhibit. There's a long path of dead things reincarnated to look lively again—woolly mammoth, short-tailed hopping mouse, western camel, sea mink—and at each wax or taxidermized figure, she mimics its shape, its expression. She

brings her arm to her nose and flails her makeshift trunk. Holds triangled hands to her forehead and charges at strangers. With each transformation, I get a moment with Mason. A Mason from before. The Mason who burned his fingertips, perfecting fire-building in boy scouts. Who watched cartoons in my lap, pajamaed and soap-smelling. Who drew crayon portraits of him or me or us, and gifted them to me for no reason at all.

Madison sees a big cat. Fangs, a thick mane, and claws. A terror. She's jumping, ponytail bobbing. Then, she runs. Lunges down the hall with light-up sneakers popping color like police sirens. Her steps make loud smacks on the tile, and her shrill shriek echoes. And I can see her turning fearful, turning angry and selfish like him, and my stomach wrestles with itself. I can see her losing her sweetness, growing fangs and claws of her own. I don't want her to be him. When Madison trips and falls and starts wailing, I run after her. Her knee is bleeding. Tears snake into her mouth and snot bubbles around her nostrils. Her face is washed red like she's suffocating. As I sit on the cold floor, I feel my own tears coming, and all I want to do is hold her. Hold my granddaughter. Hold Madison.

"Hush," I tell her. "Hush, my baby. Everything's going to be okay."

I collect her curled body. Brush her hair out of her face. Her whole body is warm, and she wraps her pudgy arms around my neck. She's still crying into my skin when I stand and carry her out of the museum. We walk into the balmy heat of the day, both striped with tears, and I bring Madison closer. Like a mother wolf would hold her cub. Like a marsupial would caress her pouch.